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Tribute to William Matthews

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William Matthews

(1942-1997)

“From the beginning, I’ve loved the sensuous wit, rueful play, sense, and intelligence, and the startling quiet beauty of William Matthews’ poems. It is clear that the gift that has been with him from the start has been his own.” This praise of William Matthews from W. S. Merwin is easy to concur with. Besides being a remarkable poet, William Matthews was also an editor and co-founder with Russell Banks of that important literary journal *Lillabulero*, and he was also past-president of the Poetry Society of America. In 1996 he received the National Book Critics Circle Award, and in 1997 the Ruth Lilly Award. Matthews was also a friend of the prose poem, and many of us prose poets still carry around his and Mary Sweeney’s translations of the prose poetry of Jean Follain. The three prose poems that follow are from his second collection, *Sleek for the Long Flight*, republished in 1988 by White Pine Press. We thank White Pine for permission to reprint them.

William Matthews

THE CALCULUS

There is a culture which counts like this: “one, two, many.” It is sufficient. They don’t use numbers to measure. There are so many women your wife gets pushed out of bed. Everyone knows without a name for it how many dead men a camel can carry. There is so little light the dark part of each eye grows knuckle-size.

The invention of zero will end their life. They don’t say “no moon tonight”; they say “the moon is gone.” We can add this egg of absence to anything—then we are richer.

William Matthews

TALK

The body is never silent. Aristotle said that we can't hear the music of the spheres because it is the first thing that we hear, blood at the ear. Also the body is brewing its fluids. It is braiding the rope of food that moors us to the dead. Because it snuffles and farts, we love the unpredictable. Because breath goes in and out, there are two of each of us and they distrust each other. The body's reassuring slurps and creaks are like a dial tone: we can always call up the universe. And so we are always talking. My body and I sit up late, telling each other our troubles. And when two bodies are near each other, they begin talking in body-sonar. The art of conversation is not dead! Still, for long periods, it is comatose. For example, suppose my body doesn't get near enough to yours for a long time. It is disconsolate. Normally it talks to me all night: listening is how I sleep. Now it is truculent. It wants to speak directly to your body. The next voice you hear will be my body's. It sounds the same way blood sounds at your ear. It is saying *Ssshhh*, now that we, at last, are silent.

William Matthews

ATTENTION, EVERYONE

Gloom is the enemy, even to the end. The parodies of self-knowledge were embossed by Gloom inside our eyelids, and the abrasion makes us weep, for no reason, like a new bride disconsolate in the nightgown she had sewn so carefully. The dog comes back from the fields, lumpy with burrs. I put down my pen and pull them out; it is a care I have taught him to expect. I've always said it would be difficult.

I'm declaring a new regime. Its flag is woven loam. Its motto is: *Love is worth even its own disasters*. Its totem is the worm. We eat our way through grief and make it richer. We don't blunt ourselves against stones—their borders go all the way through. We go around them. In my new regime Gloom dances by itself, like a sad poet.

Also I will be sending out some letters: Dear Friends, Please come to the party for my new life. The dog will meet you at the road, barking, running stiff-legged circles. Pluck one of his burrs and follow him here. I've got lots of good wine, I'm in love, my new poems are better than my old poems. It's been too long since we started over.

The new regime will start when you lift your eyes from this page. Here it comes.